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Baptists recover from quake,
prepare to respond to needs

By Bob Allen and Greg Warner

LOS ANGELES (ABP) -- Baptists in Los Angeles emerged shaken and bruised from a devastating earthquake which struck the metropolitan area early Jan. 17. Meanwhile, Baptists elsewhere -- both near and far -- stepped in to help with disaster relief.

"A lot of people around here are just trying to help themselves," observed Don Hargis, director of men's ministries for the California Southern Baptist Convention.

Hargis was among the first Baptist volunteers to accompany California Baptists' two portable kitchen units into the hard-hit San Fernando Valley, site of the quake's epicenter.

The earthquake jolted the Los Angeles area's 9 million residents awake at 4:31 a.m., Monday, Jan. 17. Measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale, it was the largest earthquake to hit Los Angeles this century. More than 30 people were killed, scores injured, thousands left homeless and hundreds of thousands displaced because damage left their homes unsafe to enter.

Among the hardest-hit areas was the immediate neighborhood of Shepherd of the Hills Baptist Church in Chatsworth. The church is located a mile and a half north of Northridge, where at least 14 people were crushed to death when an apartment building collapsed.

"We had people living right on top of the epicenter," said Patrick Moody, executive pastor of the church, one of the largest Southern Baptist congregations on the West Coast.

The church facility, built two years ago, suffered structural damage that could cost more than \$500,000 to repair.

The church's members apparently were spared, Moody said. "We haven't had any fatalities, but we have a lot of shocked people, that more than anything else. ... As far as we know no one was hurt."

Within 24 hours the church opened its sanctuary as a shelter for people left homeless by the quake, as well as those fearful of going home. "We have people who are sleeping in parks, too afraid to sleep in their homes," Moody said.

Aftershocks continued to rattle the region a day later and were expected to continue for weeks. "We're having another one right now," said Moody, describing one of two aftershocks that hit during the telephone interview.

"The ground under you just does a little dance."

The church also is serving as a command post for rescue and relief workers, including the Red Cross and fire and police departments from the region who are assisting local authorities.

A disaster-relief unit from the California Southern Baptist Convention set up its operation in the church parking lot, feeding quake victims and rescue workers.

"When I drove up there and saw that big bunch of Baptists cooking that chili, I could have kissed the ugliest one there," said Jess Moody, senior pastor of the church and Patrick's father. The senior Moody, whose own home was damaged in the quake, ate his first meal of the day from the feeding unit Jan. 17.

The portable kitchen was moved to the Chatsworth church from nearby Orange County, where it had been in operation since last October's wildfires. It had been restocked and put back into service only a week before, said Doyle Braden, director of missions for Orange County Baptist Association.

Orange County is located about 40 miles south of the epicenter, Braden said. "It was quite a jolt here," he said, but "we're not aware of any churches in Orange County that have had any severe damage."

The unit was moved and put into service by mid-afternoon Monday, preparing food mainly for firefighters, Braden said. Many quake victims were unaware the food was available.

"If we have fed a hundred people, I will be surprised," Hargis said Tuesday morning, Jan. 18. "We are feeding a lot of workers and are not feeding a lot of the victims. It kind of breaks my heart."

However, a second, larger California Baptist unit capable of serving 10,000 meals a day, expected to be busier. It was serving as the central kitchen for the emergency command post for Valley Red Cross, Hargis said.

Hargis said the unit expected to feed upwards of 5,000 victims their Tuesday lunch, shuttled from the Red Cross command post by emergency response vehicles. For most, it was their first hot meal since the quake, Hargis said.

Another feeding unit en route from Texas will handle as many as 38,000 meals, Hargis said. Other units, with total capacity of 95,000 meals a day, are on stand-by, he said.

"I have a feeling we're going to need as much help as we can get," Hargis said. Driving along, he reported seeing people living in tents and waiting on the street, apparently afraid to go into damaged homes.

A 12-person crew representing Texas Baptist Men left Dallas Tuesday to drive non-stop to Los Angeles, said Doug Beggs of the Southern Baptist Convention's Brotherhood Commission.

"We anticipate other requests. They are still trying to assess the damage and how many people are displaced," Beggs said.

The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board contributed \$30,000 to California Baptists' disaster response, to be divided between hunger-relief and disaster-relief funds.

All the Baptist churches in the area sustained damage, Hargis said. One congregation, First Baptist Church of Sylmar, sustained heavy damage, according to Hargis, who said he had spoken to the church's pastor.

Hargis coordinates disaster relief for California Southern Baptists, and has been involved on-site in 11 separate responses the last two years. He said the devastation in suburban Los Angeles compares to the worst he has seen.

"This is totally different," he said. In 30 blocks around the Shepherd of the Hills Church "every single home" sustained \$50,000 damage or more, he estimated. "Everything in the inside is just torn up. There's not even a shelf on the wall. I would say it ranks up there."

Another area church, Good Shepherd Baptist Church in Sylmar, which operates a drug and alcohol rehab center, suffered no major structural damage, said staff member Gary Owens. "Everything is pretty much intact," he said. The church lost a water heater and was without power for about 24 hours.

The Sylmar area took "a pretty intense hit" with some major fires and rock and sediment slides from mountains. "We were very lucky, compared with most of the people around here," Owens said.

Ed Adams, a church planter strategist working with Gold Coast Baptist Association, which borders the San Fernando Valley, said: "We've had some damage to church buildings. We know of two churches -- mostly cosmetic, as far as we know."

Associational leaders, however, were not as fortunate. The Simi Valley home of Royal Avenue Baptist Church pastor Steve Pope received such major damage that authorities declared it unsafe for his family to inhabit, Adams said.

The association's worship director, Greg Reed, and his wife, Melinda, also reportedly lost their home and belongings, he said.

"I'm quite sure there are more houses in our association -- it's the tip of the iceberg," Adams said.

Jess Moody estimated his house suffered \$50,000 in damage, an experience he said makes it easier to identify with other quake victims. "I know how they feel," the pastor said, his voice choking with emotion.

"The big-shot preacher sure got lowered," he continued. "To see these people hurting like this is something else. But it shows that Christianity works through people. Everybody's pulling together to get through this."

Adams said the Gold Coast associational office received several calls from Baptists waiting to be deployed in relief efforts. "We'll have a ready army, believe me," he said.

Despite responding to major disasters for the third time in less than two years, the California Baptist disaster-relief operation "has not really been stressed that bad," said Hargis.

The units were activated for last fall's wildfires, which caused \$500 million in damage, and the 1992 Los Angeles riots, with a damage toll of \$1 billion. Until now, however, the units never had to feed large numbers of people for long periods of time.

Another important resource -- volunteers -- continue to come forward in large numbers. "We've had a lot of people volunteer. Baptists really turn out when there's a crisis," Hargis said.

Volunteers from the Shepherd of the Hills church planned to distribute a handout in nearby neighborhoods to inform residents of the church's shelter and feeding center. The handout also would invite residents to Sunday worship, Patrick Moody said, and steer them toward spiritual reflection about their earthquake experiences.

The earthquake is "a moral wake-up call" for a city whose residents are often hardened to spiritual matters, Moody said. "What it does, figuratively speaking, it shakes off all the material things, which really pass away, and makes them look at what is really important."

"People are saying this really puts things in perspective," he continued. "We have so many materially oriented people." He predicted Angelenos will emerge from the quake more focused on "what is really important, and that's the spiritual dimension."

"There is a real need for nurturing people back to health," he said.

Australian Baptist leader
killed in car accident

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- The national secretary of the Baptist Union of Australia, Ollwyn Abbott, died Jan. 10 in a car accident.

Abbott was killed while returning from a national Baptist convention in Brisbane to his home in Melbourne. The crash also injured his wife, Winsome, who was hospitalized with a broken arm and severe bruises. Doctors continued to monitor her for signs of internal bleeding.

"The news of his death came as an enormous shock to Baptists everywhere, for Ollwyn Abbott's influence was felt at every level of Baptist church life," said Tony Cupit, director for evangelism, education, study and research at the Baptist World Alliance, headquartered in McLean, Va.

Baptist World Alliance general secretary Denton Lotz called Abbott "a great friend of the BWA" noted for his financial and planning skills and prophetic voice. "We shall miss him very much," Lotz said.

Before leading Australian Baptists, Abbott was a general manager of the National Bank of Australia. He served 15 years as chairman of the executive council of the Baptist Union of Victoria. Since 1990 Abbott has been an Australian representative of the General Council of the BWA.

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-- By Wendy Ryan

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